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I WAS SITTING IN THIS BAR IN LUXEMBOURG...

. . . and he said, 'Let's go to Katanga'

by Jan Knippers Black

The cast of characters at Kinshasa's Intercontinental Hotel was worthy of Graham Greene: missionaries and mercenaries, newsmen and con men, diplomatic troubleshooters and Middle East oil magnates. Encountering this motley collection in Zaire some months ago, I had a powerful sense of *deja vu*. In many ways, it was a replay of a scene in which I had appeared nearly 20 years earlier as a perplexed walk-on. Actors and scripts may change, but roles and plots seem to remain the same, confirming for me that the United States is congenitally incapable of learning anything from past experience.

In the summer of 1961, a naive 21-year-old woman from rural Tennessee vagabonding across Europe, I stumbled upon a nest of Americans at the Hotel Dolphin in Luxembourg. They turned out to be the managers and crewmen of two non-scheduled airlines called Intercontinental and Seven Seas. For several days, I sat in the Dolphin's bar at cocktail hour, entranced by the spectacle of the crews staggering in. "Hotter than a pistol in Singapore today," they would say. Or: "You haven't seen a mob scene until you've seen Cairo." Finally, one of the Seven Seas co-pilots, amused at my wide-eyed wonder, turned to me and asked if I'd like to go to Katanga. "Sure," I said. "Where's that?"

They told me, more or less, but time was short and there were things to do. I was rushed into Brussels for a visa and a yellow fever shot, back-dated. I asked about a ticket. No problem, they said; I would be a guest of the airline. This is terrific, I thought. Nobody bothered to tell me there was a war going on in Katanga.

The flight, in a seasoned four-engine propeller plane, took nearly 30 hours, including stopovers in Algiers and Kano, Nigeria. The stopover in Algiers was memorable because it set the tone for the entire adventure. The plane was surrounded by surly policemen who kept their machine guns pointed at the cabin door, and we were not allowed to disembark. The front section of the plane, filled with crates of howling dogs, added a touch of surrealism. I don't remember why the dogs were aboard. I'm not sure anybody knew.

My introduction to the complex conflict in the Congo began at the Elizabethville airport, where we were met by United Nations troops. The soldiers were fair-haired and pink-cheeked, confused and obviously frightened European boys even younger than I was. They were full of horror stories about nuns being chopped to pieces in broad daylight in the middle of the city. This gave me pause, but I was still anxious to get out into the countryside. My airline hosts, however, kept me on a short leash. I thought our hotel—the Leopold, a busy but elegant and unfrenzied place—was altogether too safe to be interesting. It was blown up a few weeks later.

The first problem arose when we made ready to leave Elizabethville. There were few flights out of the country (planes had a habit of running into bullets on take-off) and there was a long list of whites waiting desperately to get out. I had no ticket and no apparent reason for being there in the first place. This brought me to the attention of the local troops working for Moise Tshombe, who controlled the breakaway province of Katanga, and they treated me with suspicion. I learned that I was to be detained. At the last minute, the Seven Seas crew found me a stewardess uniform and put me aboard the plane. I played my role gratefully, spilling coffee and wine all over the passengers on the 30-hour trip back to Luxembourg.

At the time, the Katanga trip seemed merely a bizarre adventure, something worth telling about back in Tennessee. But as the years went by I became more and more curious about the intrigue in which I had been involved. A State Department official in Hong Kong told me Seven Seas Airlines really had been working for the United Nations. A businessman in Morocco told me Seven Seas really had been working for Tshombe. And then I ran across the son of the man who had identified himself to me as the manager of Seven Seas. The son confirmed what I already suspected: his father, now retired, was a career CIA officer. Both Intercontinental and Seven Seas had belonged to the CIA, he said, and on that occasion in 1961 Seven Seas had indeed been under overt charter to the U.N., but covertly—without the knowledge even of most State Department officials—had been put at the disposal of Tshombe. He recalled my escapade; he said the U.S. authorities in Katanga had been much embarassed by their inability to tell Tshombe who I was, and, after my unauthorized departure, I was declared persona non grata.

Et Tu, Mobutu?

In May 1978, the Congo—now Zaire—and its secessionist province, Katanga—now Shaba—were once again in the headlines. Lunda and Baluba tribesmen had invaded Shaba and from the cry that went up in the White House you might have thought they were marching on Atlanta. A similar invasion of Shaba the previous year had caused hardly a ripple of concern in Washington: Why should this latest tribal conflict in the heart of Africa be seen as a crisis for the United States?

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